



# Action for Healthy Kids

## Background

### **The Challenge: Preventing and reversing overweight among American children**

Overweight and obesity among American children—the incidence of which has tripled over the past 20 years—is recognized as a serious and growing health and economic issue. Most overweight children have at least one medical complication, such as Type II diabetes, gallbladder disease, asthma or sleep apnea. Annual obesity-associated hospital costs among youths between the ages of 6 and 17 have increased from \$35 million during 1979-81 to \$127 million during 1997-1999.

Research indicates that overweight adolescents have a 70 to 80 percent chance of becoming obese adults. That means today's heavy kids, who already have to contend with the negative psychosocial effects of being overweight—depression, anxiety disorders and isolation from their peers—most likely will suffer the dire health consequences of adult obesity, including diabetes, coronary heart disease and hypertension.

The causes of childhood overweight and obesity—increasingly sedentary lifestyles and over-consumption of high-calorie foods and beverages—are no mystery. But getting kids away from their televisions and computer screens is difficult for many reasons, from lack of adult supervision and role models to unsafe neighborhoods. With “super size” portions of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods being cheap, accessible at all times and easy to eat on the fly, trying to persuade children to eat according to the Food Guide Pyramid becomes a daunting challenge.

### **Our Response: Working with children in their schools**

Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK)—a nationwide initiative chaired by former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, MD, PhD, and applauded by current Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona—is rising to this challenge. Formed in the fall of 2002 following a national summit in Washington, D.C., for which First Lady Laura Bush served as Honorary Chairperson, Action for Healthy Kids is an integrated, national-state effort addressing childhood obesity by focusing on changes in the school environment.

This effort includes a partnership of more than 35 national organizations, industry and government agencies representing education, physical activity, health and nutrition—such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the United States Department of Agriculture and the United States Department of Education. In addition to providing ongoing guidance, these organizations contributed to the development of the October 2002 national Healthy Schools Summit, as well as to the formation of 51 State Teams.

Action for Healthy Kids has a clear set of goals. In the near term, it is working to increase the number of health-promoting schools that support sound nutrition and physical activity. This is aimed at slowing the rate of increase and decreasing the degree of overweight among American children. In the long term, AFHK aims to play a key role in reducing the overall incidence of childhood overweight nationwide.



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To achieve these goals, Action for Healthy Kids has three main thrusts:

- Improving schoolchildren's eating habits by increasing access to nutritious food and beverages on school grounds, while decreasing access to high-calorie, low-nutrient options, as well as by integrating nutrition education into the curriculum for all schoolchildren.
- Increasing schoolchildren's physical activity through physical education courses, recess, the integration of physical activity into academic classes, and co-curricular fitness programs.
- Educating administrators, educators, students, and parents about the role of sound nutrition and physical activity in academic achievement.

School-based efforts represent the best opportunity to promote American children's current and future well-being—both physical and economic—because long experience indicates that healthy behavior and academic achievement are mutually reinforcing: Students who take care of their health tend to perform better academically than students who do not, and students whose academic achievement is above average tend to take better care of their health.

### **One Size Doesn't Fit All: A state-based approach**

Made up of school administrators, educators, health professionals and other committed individuals, 51 Action for Healthy Kids State Teams are implementing a variety of creative interventions at the grassroots level to promote sound nutrition and physical activity throughout the school environment. Drawing on "Commitment to Change"—the initiative's guiding document, which was adapted from the *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*—each team has developed an action plan that is appropriate for its own state's educational system, culture and resources. For instance:

- The Connecticut team is collaborating with the state Department of Education to develop a new wellness framework that includes health and physical education standards, and is helping local districts implement the revised state framework.
- The Florida team is using surveys and public awareness campaigns to ensure that schools across the state provide preK-12 students with quality daily physical education as well adequate and appropriate time for meals and recess.
- The Indiana team is using teacher training to provide schoolchildren with age-appropriate and culturally sensitive instruction in health education; is recruiting schools to participate in pilot fresh fruit/vegetable programs; and is officially recognizing schools that improve their School Health index scores.
- The Texas team is working to ensure school district accountability by educating legislators about the physical activity requirements, and is developing a certification program for physical education instructors.
- The Kansas team is working collaboratively with Team Nutrition to form student health councils that devise and implement student-led solutions for improved nutrition and physical activity. The team is offering mini-grants to support School Health Council projects.



## Action for Healthy Kids Backgrounder

The Action for Healthy Kids national organization supports and accelerates state action plans by developing shared resources, facilitating the exchange of information and experts among teams, and by raising public awareness of their efforts, among other activities. The national organization also evaluates state-based efforts to identify and disseminate best practices—further enhancing the efficacy and impact of this coordinated, but customized, effort.

For more information, please visit [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org).

Members of the Action for Healthy Kids board of directors provide expertise and oversight to AFHK, a non-profit organization with 501 (c)(3) status, with expertise representing school foodservice, sports and physical education, nutrition industry, education administration and academicians. Alicia Moag-Stahlberg, MS, RD, a nationally recognized authority in the field of nutrition and communications, serves as the organization's executive director. The National Dairy Council and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation have provided initial funding for the Healthy Schools Summit and Action for Healthy Kids.